



# Chronicling mutants

**Geoff Boyle** reports on his initial experiences as cinematographer on VFX-laden movie *Mutant Chronicles*, shooting *Grass Valley Viper* to *S.twos*.

So, I've finally shot a movie – well, the first part of it, anyway; models and 2nd unit are still to come. And after more than 20 years of shooting commercials on film, my first movie has been shot digitally.

It's been a strange experience for me. Normally when I get interviewed with the possibility of shooting a film, I get down to the last two DPs and then get rejected because I'm a 'commercials' cameraman and will be too slow as a result. This process takes months.

This time I had my first meeting with Simon Hunter, the director, and Tim Dennison and Peter Le Terriere, the producers, in a coffee bar near their

office in Marylebone. Simon was very interested in what I knew and felt about digital and we talked about the look he wanted. I dragged out my laptop and loaded SpeedGrade and then tried altering the look of some images. Of course, it was in maximum power saving, so was as slow as hell and I looked a klutz, but it worked and showed that we understood each other's ideas about the look. Of course, I'd made up a special DVD showreel for the meeting that had a very sci-fi look, but the first thing Simon said was, "I don't want that typical hard blue backlight look that all SF films have." Whoops! I said I wouldn't bother leaving the DVD, as it

was all – well, hard blue backlight. But Simon said he wanted to see it anyway.

We followed up with a second meeting in their Shepperton offices a couple of weeks later and after what seemed like a great meeting Peter brought up the commercials thing. Uh-oh, I thought, here we go again.

I'd talked to Greg, my agent, that morning, and had been very negative about the meeting, saying, "here we go again, another waste of time." Five hours each way from Devon. He screamed at me, told me not to bother going. Told me it was a waste of time going with that attitude: I had to go knowing that I was the one. So I did. I told Greg that I had

**Above: gaffer Dan Lowe rigs a Kisslite on the Viper, using a single point suspension rig built by grip Mark Jones.**



**Director Simon Hunter operating in the swamp with Dan using wireless focus.**



**Geoff Boyle is cinematography editor of Showreel magazine and a respected DoP. He started the cinematography mailing list (CML) in 1996 with 60 members and it now has over 3000 members in 148 countries.**

look and then playing; I love being able to print these out as references. I had a folder next to me at all times that had prints of every scene that we'd shot in it. I love the fact that the editor is looking at pictures the way I intend them to look; I love the way actors could look at full-res replays with the final look applied.

### Lighting

So what have I missed? Oh! Lighting. We tested a number of different ways of lighting the green screen and ended up using KinoFlo 525 Green Screen tubes, as these gave us the cleanest key at the lowest light level. We had hundreds of them, using four banks at the top and two banks at the bottom. We had them on 6ft centres, which meant a gap of less than 2ft between lamps.

Key lights varied depending on the set and went from 20Ks to 6K Arri Xs, which I love for their really, really hard shadows, and of course the 5K

MoleBeam featured a lot. I also used a lot of Source 4s for patterns, but also had MAC 2000s for patterns I wanted to control in shot – water ripple effects mainly. Lots of 5Ks through gobos and an enormous amount of Dedos.

There were two real lifesavers in the lighting area... well, three actually. First was remote dimmer control of everything; second, large Springballs on huge boomarms, so that I could drop in a little local fill or rim; and, of course, the real get-out-of-jail card: the Kisslite from Gekko. This ringlight was remote-controlled, so I could gradually dim down the fill as the camera got closer to an artist. I could do this from a fair distance away while watching a monitor. This approach meant I could light the set in a very high-contrast way, but reduce the contrast for important close-ups.

Although I used my meter in the normal way, as did my gaffers, to establish the base light, we used the

monitors with the Truelight look applied to fine-tune, as we were able to see exactly what we were getting.

It's odd for me that I switched from film to video once before in 1980, thinking that the time had come and that it would replace 16mm. I lost a lot of money pioneering then. I switched back to film for the majority of my work, but have always tried to keep tabs on where we were going digitally. I watched as people said the F900 was wonderful; I tested and decided that it wasn't: not that it's bad, it's just not good enough.

The Viper came out, but the workflow wasn't right. Then the Genesis and the D20 came out, and the Dalsa, and the Viper found a workflow and things started to change. Now I'm totally happy to shoot digitally; there are some jobs I still think film is more appropriate for – and I'll use it as required, but we are now entering an era of rapid change.

DPs need to learn this kit if they're going to survive, and it's no good thinking you can lean on an HD-savvy AC to cover for you: there aren't enough to go round; believe me, I get an enormous amount of calls from DP's who want HD ACs. If the DP knows HD, then he can easily teach any good film AC.

So, a message to producers: don't just pick any DP for a digital shoot, pick one who knows digital, otherwise you're not going to get the best out of the format. But then I'd say that to a producer about to shoot on film who thought that they could use a video-trained person.

I think you might have guessed by now that I would like to do this again – but on disk, not tape.

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